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Evaluation of the University of Warwick's
outreach programme, UniTracks: The Warwick
Young Achievers' Programme:

Report 10.

**UniTracks, 2015-2019;
delivering outreach and assessing impact.**

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15 October 2019.

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Executive summary

UniTracks is one of a range of 18 long-term projects that the University of Warwick's Widening Participation (WP) department delivers to school-age children and young people in four geographic areas: Coventry, Warwickshire, and the West Midlands, with some offers open across England. UniTracks is open to around 440-520 Year 10-13 school students. Between November 2015-July 2019, CEDAR, University of Warwick, carried out an independent evaluation of the UniTracks programme, producing nine evaluation reports. This report, the tenth and final evaluation report, presents a concluding, reflective summation of the delivery and impact of UniTracks, along with an assessment of the limitations and strengths of the evaluation.

The evaluation of UniTracks adopted a 'realist evaluation' model suited to the nature of the UniTracks' offer. That evaluation provided data and findings that exhibit the majority of the required elements of Level 2 EIF standards, and all of the elements of Level 2 OFFA access standards. As such, the evaluation evidence represents a good level of evaluation in the wider context of the evaluation of similar WP initiatives, which are characterised by a lack of systematic and rigorous research.

The evaluation addressed issues of process and impact, and measured the effectiveness of UniTracks in terms of a logic model that was based on the organising approach of the programme, as laid out in Warwick's current Access and Participation Plans (APP) for 2019-2020. The process elements of the evaluation were successful in critically examining the delivery of UniTracks' projects, and provided evidence of the immediate impact of participation on the members. However, the challenges of evaluating such a WP programme limited the ability to assign attribution and long-term impact to UniTracks. As with other WP programmes, such as the Aimhigher programme, 2004-2011, UniTracks can only be said to evidence correlational impact in terms of enabling the UniTracks' members to apply for and attend research intensive universities.

Recommendations

- The evaluation of UniTracks, November 2015-July 2019 represented the application of a ‘realistic evaluation’ model, providing data and findings that exhibit the majority of the required elements of Level 2 Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) standards, and all of the elements of Level 2 Office for Fair Access (OFFA) standards. Nonetheless, throughout the evaluation, the administration by UniTracks’ staff of evaluation instruments (e.g., surveys, questionnaires) was often limited in effectiveness. In future iterations, attention should be given by UniTracks to effective administration of evaluation instruments.
- The evaluation generated evidence of the positive impact of the mentoring that the UniTracks’ members received, both as an element of the Big Deal offer, but also in e-mentoring. This finding matches that of the literature related to mentoring as part of the Aimhigher WP initiative¹, and suggests that consideration be made to introducing additional mentoring schemes for UniTracks’ members.
- Attempts to ascertain the long-term impact of UniTracks’ membership were hampered by a lack of data regarding university applications, university enrolment, and progression to other education institutions, apprenticeships, and work. It is important that data capture be enhanced for the post-school stage.

¹ Morris, M. & Golden, M (2005) Evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence challenge interim report. Research report for the Department of Education and Skills. London, DfES. Rogers, R.A. (2009) “‘No one helped out. It was like, “Get on with it. You’re an adult now. It’s up to you.” You don’t ... it’s not like you reach 17 and suddenly you don’t need any help anymore’: a study in post-16 pastoral support for Aimhigher Students’, *Pastoral Care in Education*, 27 (2) 109-118.

1. University of Warwick, Widening Participation

1.1 Background

UniTracks is one of a range of 18 long-term projects that the University of Warwick's Widening Participation department delivers to school-age children and young people in four geographic areas: Coventry, Warwickshire, the West Midlands, with some offers open across England. In response to national policy initiatives in relation to the importance of widening access to higher education (HE), all HE institutions are required to submit Access and Participation Plans (APP) to the Office for Students (OfS), which has a monitoring and compliance role: 'the OfS monitors access and participation plans to make sure that the providers honour the commitments they make to students in these plans, and take action if they do not'². HE institutions are required to present plans which outline:

- the provider's ambition for change
- what it plans to do to achieve that change
- the targets it has set
- the investment it will make to deliver the plan.³

The University of Warwick's APP provides the background, context and framework within which specific Warwick widening participation projects operate. Warwick's current APP is that for 2019-2020⁴, with the University's new 'APP 2025' being, at the time of writing, still in

² <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/access-and-participation-plans/> (accessed, 7 October 2019).

³ Ibid.

⁴ https://warwick.ac.uk/study/outreach/universityofwarwick_app_2019-2020_v1_10007163.pdf (accessed, 7 October 2019).

the process of acceptance. The University's widening participation strategic priorities are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: A summary of University of Warwick's widening participation (WP) strategy priorities⁵

	Strategic	
1	To widen <u>demand</u> and increase support to facilitate a talent <u>pipeline</u> for widening participation target groups to consider higher education.	Underpinning research and evaluation nexus to enhance impact and strengthen the evidence base.
2	To accelerate <u>access</u> of undergraduate intake to Warwick from a range of WP backgrounds nationally.	
3	To improve <u>student success</u> outcomes for WP targeted groups.	
4	To enhance <u>progression</u> outcomes to PG and graduate employment for Warwick students from WP groups.	
5	To enhance Warwick's <u>commitment</u> to WP – sector leading at the policy forefront shaping and influencing.	
6	To enhance opportunities for 'targeted' people in the region to access and progress to higher education.	

1.2 UniTracks

1.2.1 Aims and target group

The four highlighted priorities, 1-3, 6, and the 'research and evaluation' priority, in Table 1, have direct relationship to the UniTracks offer, which forms part of the University of Warwick's widening participation programme. The overriding aim of UniTracks is to support school student members to successfully apply to the UK's most competitive, research intensive universities. To address that aim UniTracks engages between 440-520 school students from Years 10 – 13 (ages 14 – 18 years) in a programme of outreach and widening participation events aimed at talented/highly able school students (top 10-5% nationally)

⁵ https://warwick.ac.uk/study/outreach/universityofwarwick_app_2019-2020_v1_10007163.pdf, p.5 (accessed, 7 October 2019).

from 23 partner schools⁶. The linkages between the most relevant strategy priorities identified in Table 1, and the operation of UniTracks are summarised in Table 2: WP strategic priorities and UniTracks.

Table 2: WP strategic priorities and UniTracks

Strategic priorities	UniTracks offer
To enhance opportunities for ‘targeted’ people in the region to access and progress to higher education.	UniTracks’ membership for 440-520 school pupils from Year 10-13.
To widen <u>demand</u> and increase support to facilitate a talent <u>pipeline</u> for widening participation target groups to consider higher education.	Offers: visits to University of Warwick campus, e.g., Launch Day event for Y10; Big Deal & Shooting the Past projects (Y10 pupils).
To accelerate <u>access</u> of undergraduate intake to Warwick from a range of WP backgrounds nationally	Offered e-mentoring (in conjunction with Brightside Trust), 2016-17 & 2017-18 (Y11 & Y12 pupils).
To improve <u>student success</u> outcomes for WP targeted groups.	Offers places on Warwick GCSE (Y11 pupils) & A level Y13 pupils) ‘boot camps’. Addresses skills, such as team working & speaking, in Big Deal, Shooting the Past schemes.
Underpinning research and evaluation nexus to enhance impact and strengthen the evidence base.	UniTracks evaluation carried out by Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal & Research (CEDAR), University of Warwick (2016-20).

⁶ 2019 UniTracks School Guide, https://warwick.ac.uk/study/outreach/whatweoffer/unitracks/unitracks_schools_teachers_guide_-_sept_2019_online.pdf and 2019 Students and Parents’ Guide: https://warwick.ac.uk/study/outreach/whatweoffer/unitracks/unitracks_students_parents_guide_-_sept_2019_online.pdf (accessed, 9 October 2019).

The UniTracks offer has changed over time, with, for example, changes in the operation of the Big Deal project (a business-orientated competition for Year 10 UniTracks' members⁷), and the cancellation of the e-mentoring offer after 2018, as a result of financial issues in relation to the Brightside Trust platform⁸. However, the fundamental approach of UniTracks has remained unchanged. The choice of eligible schools is made using an: 'historical list that includes measures such as free school meals, and % of POLAR 3 Q1 students. [UniTracks has a] focus more on the individual students meeting criteria, as school are just considered a 'proxy' for helping us identify where higher proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds might be found,'⁹. The school students themselves are chosen from high ability students who meet strict eligibility requirements relating, for example, to no parental history of higher education, residents of low participation neighbourhoods, and residents of areas of significant socio-economic deprivation. The metrics used for selecting disadvantaged school students are 'based on: postcode indicators (POLAR 3, IMD), parental qualification (i.e. whether parents/carers went to HE); free school meal eligibility, pupil premium, and LAC [Looked After Children],'¹⁰. There are no metrics used relating to gender or ethnicity – 'We [UniTracks] do not look at ethnicity and gender when selecting students (this means we don't specifically use metrics on those background characteristic'¹¹.

⁷ See the CEDAR evaluations of the Big Deal in 2016, 2017, and 2018:

Cullen, Stephen Michael (2018) [*Evaluation of the University of Warwick's outreach programme, UniTracks: The Warwick Young Achievers' Programme : Report 8 : UniTracks' Big Deal, Shooting the Past, and Mentoring, 2018.*](#) Coventry: Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), University of Warwick.

Cullen, Stephen Michael and Thomas, Ruth (2017) [*Evaluation of the University of Warwick's outreach programme, UniTracks : The Warwick Young Achievers' Programme : Report 5 : The Big Deal Enterprise Challenge, 2017.*](#) Coventry: Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), University of Warwick.

Cullen, Stephen Michael (2016) [*Evaluation of the University of Warwick's outreach programme, UniTracks : The Warwick Young Achievers' Programme : Report 2 : The Big Deal Enterprise Challenge, 2016.*](#) Coventry: Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), University of Warwick.

⁸ Cullen, Stephen Michael (2018) [*Evaluation of the University of Warwick's outreach programme, UniTracks: The Warwick Young Achievers' Programme : Report 8 : UniTracks' Big Deal, Shooting the Past, and Mentoring, 2018.*](#) Coventry: Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), University of Warwick.

⁹ Information provided by UniTracks in an e-mail of 6 August 2019.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

1.2.2 Logic model

The UniTracks offer is a response to the understanding that there are young people who face barriers to their participation in HE, and, specifically, in research intensive universities, and are, therefore, at risk of not applying to, or entering these HE institutions. In order to assist some young people from this at risk cohort, UniTracks aims to deliver interventions (inputs) that help build interest in HE, and boost skills and self-confidence. These can be seen as enabling factors which UniTracks addresses with the aim of helping the young people to overcome the barriers to participation in research intensive universities. UniTracks' inputs are expected to strengthen enabling factors and lead to positive outcomes in terms of knowledge of HE, enhanced skills and improved self-confidence. This logic model is represented in figure 1. Logic model for UniTracks.

Figure 1: Logic model for UniTracks



The logic model is central to any consideration of the impact of UniTracks for three reasons. Firstly, UniTracks' interventions over the Y10-Y13 programme lifecycle of the school students represents a very small part of the experiences, and formal education of the young people involved. As a result, attribution is very difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate. Secondly, in evaluation terms, there is no comparable control group available for the UniTracks'

cohorts. Finally, UniTracks' long term tracking of students is limited, and the outcomes in terms of HE, or non-HE destinations, retention and progression, are available for only a small minority of UniTracks' members; for example, for the 2015 university entry cohort, the destination of only 10 UniTracks' members was known, and only 17 of the 2018 university entry¹². As a result, the impact of UniTracks is most effectively assessed by evaluation findings seen in the light of the logic model.

1.2.3 UniTracks, evaluation to enhance impact and strengthen the evidence base.

The University of Warwick's strategic WP priorities include the development of 'underpinning research and evaluation nexus to enhance impact and strengthen the evidence base' (Tables 1 & 2). The Office for Students lays stress on the role of evaluation in determining the success of WP programmes, and provides guidance on standards of evidence and the evaluation of impact of outreach¹³. Both Warwick's WP strategy, and UniTracks incorporate evaluation into the WP model.

1.2.4 Widening Participation, and UniTracks - evaluation challenges

1.2.4.1 *The challenge of evaluation, the example of Aimhigher*

In relation to UniTracks, the evaluation, carried out by CEDAR from November 2015-July 2019, has addressed challenges relating to evaluating WP interventions in general, as well as specific challenges in evaluating UniTracks. Attempts to provide good evaluation based evidence for the impact of WP schemes have met with mixed success. Referring to this issue, Dytham and Hughes (2017) argued that, 'it is commonly noted that a lack of systematic and rigorous research affects the quality of knowledge produced as well as the potential to influence [WP] policy,'¹⁴.

¹² Data provided by Warwick WP.

¹³ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation-and-effective-practice/> (accessed, 8 October 2019)

¹⁴ Dytham, S. & Hughes, C. (2017) Widening participation research and evaluation: where are we now? Discussion Paper. University of Warwick, Coventry. <http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/88772> (accessed, 8 October 2019).

A precursor to the current England-wide WP programmes run by HE institutions was the 'Aimhigher' initiative. From 2004-2011 the UK government funded Aimhigher across England as a national initiative that was developed and delivered at local level. Aimhigher's interventions were, 'interventions aimed at potential first generation entrants to higher education. The purpose of the interventions has largely been a combination of attainment and aspiration-raising with target pupils, and owing to policy and funding cycles that require demonstrable results, has mainly focussed on pupils in school years 10-12 (ages 14-16),'¹⁵. Typical Aimhigher interventions included summer school experience at universities, master classes, university visits, guest lecturing and mentoring. This also represents a very similar approach to that taken by University of Warwick's WP programme, and UniTracks. The Aimhigher initiative was accompanied by approximately 40 local evaluations that, however, exhibited a difficulty in common with most WP evaluation work – 'the challenge of actually evidencing impact on widening participation,'¹⁶. The majority of Aimhigher evaluations were qualitative, and tended to focus on events, or the processes of intervention delivery. The evaluated interventions included: summer schools, conferences, residential events, and mentoring. Beyond the evaluation of individual interventions, there were claims made by evaluators, and Aimhigher, that the programme contributed to raising young people's awareness of university, their aspirations and their self-confidence. However, a review of the Aimhigher evaluations concluded that, 'we can only consider the correlational *contribution* of Aimhigher to widening participation through its impact on performance in schools, application rates to higher education and to a limited degree, social class,'¹⁷. The difficulties associated with attribution, the over-reliance on qualitative methodology, and a lack of use of mixed methods were seen to contribute to the limitations in establishing the impact of Aimhigher WP intervention. These are issues which relate not only to Aimhigher evaluations, but also to similar, and succeeding initiatives, such as the HE WP programmes, including UniTracks.

¹⁵ Doyle, M. & Griffin, M. (2012) 'Raised aspirations and attainment? A review of the impact of Aimhigher (2004-2011) on widening participation in higher education in England', *London Review of Education*, 10 (1), p.76.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.78.

¹⁷ Ibid. p.80.

1.2.4.2 Setting standards of evidence and evaluating UniTracks

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) has established standards of evidence for interventions which can be usefully applied to outreach and WP. The EIF framework recognises three levels of evidence:

- **Level 4** recognises programmes with evidence of a long-term positive impact through multiple rigorous evaluations. At least one of these studies must have evidence of improving a child outcome lasting a year or longer.
- **Level 3** recognises programmes with evidence of a short-term positive impact from at least one rigorous evaluation – that is, where a judgment about causality can be made.
- **Level 2** recognises programmes with preliminary evidence of improving a child outcome, but where an assumption of causal impact cannot be drawn.¹⁸

The evaluation evidence presented in the previous nine UniTracks evaluation reports, and summarised in *Report 9: Impact*¹⁹ equates most closely to the EIF Level 2, ‘Preliminary evidence’ category, with the nine evaluations exhibiting the following aspects of Level 2 evidence:

¹⁸ ‘EIF Evidence Standards’, <https://guidebook.eif.org.uk/eif-evidence-standards> (accessed, 9 October 2019).

¹⁹ Cullen, Stephen Michael. 2018, *Evaluation of the University of Warwick's outreach programme, UniTracks : The Warwick Young Achievers' Programme : Report 9 : Impact*, Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), University of Warwick, <http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/116102/>

The programme has evidence of improving a child outcome from a study involving at least 20 participants, representing 60% of the sample, using validated instruments.

The evidence must meet the following requirements:

- Participants complete the same set of measures once shortly before participating in the programme and once again immediately afterwards.
- The sample is representative of the intervention's target population in terms of age, demographics and level of need. The sample characteristics are clearly stated.
- The sample is sufficiently large to test for the desired impact. A minimum of 20 participants complete the measures at both time points within each study group (eg a minimum of 20 participants in pre/post study not involving a comparison group or a minimum of 20 participants in the treatment group AND comparison group). [...]
- The measures are appropriate for the intervention's anticipated outcomes and population. [...]
- Measurement is independent of any measures used as part of the treatment. The methods used to analyse results are appropriate given the data being analysed (categorical, ordinal, ratio/parametric or non-parametric, etc) and the purpose of the analysis.
- There are no harmful effects.
- There is consistency amongst the findings, resulting in few mixed results within the study.²⁰

²⁰ 'EIF Evidence Standards', <https://guidebook.eif.org.uk/eif-evidence-standards> (accessed, 9 October 2019).

However, there are areas, particularly in relation to establishing statistically significant impact, where it was not possible to generate the data. Had this been possible, there would still have remained the issue of attribution. UniTracks represents only a very small part of the education and experiences of the young people concerned, and the evaluation problem of causal attribution is, given the constraints of the UniTracks' interventions, insurmountable. Attributing causality in small projects is highly problematic, and effective evaluation requires an approach that was precluded by the UniTracks model²¹.

The limitations imposed on the evaluation of UniTracks, particularly those relating to data collection (usually administered by UniTracks staff, or school staff), and the lack of a control group, compelled an evaluation approach known as 'realist evaluation'²². The realist evaluation method stresses the role of 'Context, a Mechanism and an Outcome'²³ (CMO). Applied to UniTracks, this approach could, for example, suggest that the young people will be enabled (context) by the UniTracks' interventions (mechanism) to apply for and enter research-led universities (outcome). This approach is very similar to the logic model that describes UniTracks interventions (Figure 1, Logic model for UniTracks). In order to carry out a realist evaluation, data collection should involve:

Quantitative and qualitative research [that] builds up a picture of the programme in action. Documentary evidence, direct observation, surveys, interviews, focus groups, quantitative data etc. may all be used. The aim should be to increase understanding of the different CMO configurations which have been triggered by the programme. Data collection should be designed in such a way as to collect information which can

²¹ White, Howard & Phillips, Daniel (2012) *Addressing attribution of cause and effect in small n impact evaluations: towards an integrated framework*, International Initiative for Impact Evaluation, New Delhi.

²² Pawson, R & Tilley, N (2004) *Realist Evaluation*, http://www.communitymatters.com.au/RE_chapter.pdf (accessed, 9 October 2019). See also: Pawson, R & Tilley, *Realistic Evaluation* (1997), SAGE, London.

²³ Pawson, R & Tilley, N (2004) *Realist Evaluation*, pp.6-9.

refine, refute or demonstrate how conjectural CMO configurations have operated in practice.²⁴

The evaluation of UniTracks did employ the collection and analysis of documentary evidence, direct observation, surveys, interviews, focus groups, and quantitative data. As such, the evaluation, while not matching all the requirements of the EIF's Level 2 evaluation, does, however, match Office for Fair Access (OFFA) Level 2 Standards of Evaluation Practice²⁵. The OFFA standards consist of three levels of evidence, with Level 1 being the basic, expected, level for an OFFA access agreement. Level 2 is defined as being evaluation that:

In addition to a narrative account, the HEI [Higher Education Institution] has collected data on impact and can report evidence that those receiving an intervention treatment have better outcomes, though this does not establish any direct casual effect.

Evidence: Quantitative and/or Qualitative evidence of a pre/post treatment change or a treatment/non-treatment difference.²⁶

The evaluation of UniTracks, November 2015 – July 2019 therefore represents the application of a realistic evaluation model, providing data and findings that exhibit the majority of the required elements of Level 2 EIF standards, and all of the elements of Level 2 OFFA access standards. As such, the evaluation evidence represents a good level of

²⁴ White, Howard & Phillips, Daniel (2012) *Addressing attribution*, p.36.

²⁵ Crawford, C, Dytham, S., & Naylor, R. (2017) *The Evaluation of the Impact of Outreach; proposed standards of education; practice and associated guidance*, The Sutton Trust, University of Warwick, OFFA, Department for Education, London.

²⁶ Ibid., p.5.

evaluation in the wider context of the evaluation of similar WP initiatives, which are characterised by a lack of systematic and rigorous research.

2. UniTracks – how effective?

2.1 The scope of the interventions

The stated aim of UniTracks is to provide interventions for the UniTracks cohort with the aim of improving outcomes in four areas:

- Building confidence.
- Acquiring skills.
- Understanding university.
- Building aspirations, especially with regard to university.

School students who join UniTracks in Year 10 (aged 14) are members until the end of Year 13 (aged 18). Over those four school years, there are a number of UniTracks' interventions available to them, and members are required to commit to the core events. The Year 10 members are offered three events in their first year as UniTracks members: the *Launch Day* at the University of Warwick, the *Big Deal Enterprise Challenge* (Big Deal), and the '*Shooting the Past*' Competition. The Big Deal gives young people the chance to take part in a business and enterprise focused project. In addition, Year 10 has been offered since 2016 an alternative history and film-focused project, 'Shooting the Past'. Year 11 and Year 13 members of UniTracks are offered support during the period of their public examinations – GCSE and A level. The Year 11 offer is a '*GCSE Bootcamp*', which is a residential GCSE revision course in one of four subjects, mathematics, English language, chemistry or physics. It involves a two night stay at the University of Warwick, and two and a half days of revision teaching and learning. There is also a residential '*A-level Bootcamp*' held at Warwick during

the Easter holidays prior to the A level examinations. For Year 12 members of UniTracks, the academic year 2016-2017 saw the first offering of an e-mentoring scheme, but the 2017-2018 offer was delayed, with little mentoring being undertaken until the summer term of that school year, and none subsequently.

All of the interventions identified above have been evaluated at least once, using both quantitative and qualitative methods - surveys, questionnaires, observations, face-to-face and telephone interviews, and focus groups - to gather data from UniTracks' members, mentors, school staff, university staff, parents and Brightside Trust representatives²⁷. In total, the evaluation carried out 128 interviews (67 of which were with UniTracks' members), and gathered data from 358 questionnaires completed by UniTracks' members, September 2015-June 2019.

2.2 Strengths

The evaluation sought to address two questions in relation to UniTracks. Firstly, how effective were the events and the processes of intervention delivery; and secondly, what evidence was there of the *positive* impact on the UniTracks' members of the interventions in relation to the four intended outcomes? In 2.2.1 the findings from the evaluations of the programmes are discussed in relation to:

- The logic model that underpins UniTracks and how far the evaluation has evidenced the success of that model.
- The lessons for the delivery of UniTracks.
- The challenges facing WP evaluations.

²⁷ See pp.8-13, Cullen, Stephen Michael. 2018, *Evaluation of the University of Warwick's outreach programme, UniTracks : The Warwick Young Achievers' Programme : Report 9 : Impact*, Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), University of Warwick, <http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/116102/>

This is then followed by a section (2.3) discussing the weaknesses of the interventions and the evaluations in relation to the logic model, lessons and evaluation challenges.

2.2.1 Processes of intervention delivery; impact and lessons for delivery

The evaluation of UniTracks since November 2015 (when the evaluation began) involved 10 programmes:

- UniTracks Year 10s Launch Event, November 2015.
- The Big Deal Enterprise Challenge, 2016.
- Shooting the Past, 2016.
- GCSE Bootcamp, 2017.
- The Big Deal Enterprise Challenge, 2017.
- Shooting the Past, 2017.
- E-mentoring, 2016-2017.
- The Big Deal Enterprise Challenge, 2018.
- Shooting the Past, 2018.
- Mentoring, 2018.

The Launch Event was evaluated just once, while there were three evaluations of the Big Deal Enterprise Competition (Big Deal), 2016-18; three of Shooting the Past, 2016-18; two evaluations of mentoring 2016-17 and 2018; and one of the GCSE Bootcamp in 2017. However, of these offers, there were delivery problems for Shooting the Past in 2016, and Mentoring in 2018. In neither case did the offer run as planned, with the first presentation of Shooting the Past being terminated early²⁸, and the 2018 mentoring programme starting too late to enable an effective evaluation to be conducted²⁹.

2.2.1.1 The Big Deal

Of the UniTracks events and projects evaluated, the Big Deal was the most consistently well delivered. The Big Deal is a combined Warwick Business School and UniTracks offer, and is an iteration of the Big Deal competitions run at Warwick by the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (NAGTY)³⁰. In terms of the UniTracks logic model, the evaluations of the UniTracks Big Deal showed that there were positive outcomes for the participating young people in terms of all five outcomes; improved perceptions of HE, enhanced knowledge, skills and understanding boosted self-confidence and enhanced participation. The detailed content of the Big Deal offer changed over time, with, for example, the high profile location for the Big Deal final being dropped, while the business mentors' role was supplemented by undergraduate mentors by 2018. The 2017 evaluation of Big Deal, for example, concluded that:

The experience of being involved with the Big Deal, and the impact of the competition on the young people were positive. Participating in the competition enhanced skills and

²⁸ Cullen, Stephen Michael (2016) [*Evaluation of the University of Warwick's outreach programme, UniTracks: The Warwick Young Achievers' Programme : Report 3 : 'Shooting the Past', 2016*](#). Coventry: Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), University of Warwick.

²⁹ Cullen, Stephen Michael (2018) [*Evaluation of the University of Warwick's outreach programme, UniTracks: The Warwick Young Achievers' Programme : Report 8 : UniTracks' Big Deal, Shooting the Past, and Mentoring, 2018*](#). Coventry: Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), University of Warwick.

³⁰ Cullen, Stephen Michael and Lindsay, Geoff (2007) [*Evaluation of the The Big Deal National Enterprise Competition, 2007*](#). Coventry: Centre for Educational Development Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), The University of Warwick.

confidence in key areas relating to learning, school work, and post-school choices. Further, attending the Big Deal Launch Days, staying at the University of Warwick, working with the Warwick Business School and the business mentors, all had positive effects on the young people. The young people's sense of opportunities open to them in the future, their understanding of university life and study, and their longer-term aspirations were all enhanced by participation in the Big Deal.³¹

2.2.1.2 Shooting the Past

The Shooting the Past project was introduced as a UniTracks' offer in 2016 as an alternative choice for members who were not attracted to a business and enterprise competition. The first presentation of Shooting the Past faltered and was cancelled part way through presentation. The offer had been introduced too quickly, although some learning was available from the 2016 attempt. Subsequently, Shooting the Past was run successfully as a film-making project focused on local history, and run by UniTracks in conjunction with the university's Film and TV Studies department, with support from the History Department. The evaluation of the 2018 Shooting the Past offer presented evidence that suggested that:

- Shooting the Past participants had a positive experience of the project, were motivated to do well, and remained interested in the various aspects of filmmaking and history covered by Shooting the Past.
- Shooting the Past provided additional incentives to already motivated young people to attend a research-led university.
- Shooting the Past had most impact in terms of research project experience, team working, and confidence-building.

³¹ Cullen, Stephen Michael and Thomas, Ruth (2017) [*Evaluation of the University of Warwick's outreach programme, UniTracks : The Warwick Young Achievers' Programme : Report 5 : The Big Deal Enterprise Challenge, 2017*](#). Coventry: Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), University of Warwick.

2.2.1.3 Mentoring

Although mentoring was a part of both the Big Deal and Shooting the Past, the introduction of a specific mentoring programme for Year 12 UniTracks' members did not take place until the school year, 2016-17. The mentoring scheme was an electronic one, and was run by The Brightside Trust in conjunction with UniTracks. The Brightside Trust³² has extensive experience of operating mentoring schemes, and the evaluation of the 2016-17 E-mentoring programme found that there was positive impact in terms of:

- Mentees benefited from study skills, and extension reading advice provided by their mentors.
- Mentors provided advice and information about degree courses that changed the way in which mentees thought about course options after school.
- Mentees were introduced to subject disciplines they were unaware of, and subject combinations that they did not know about.
- Much of the information that mentors provided for mentees had an important reassurance element, making mentees less apprehensive about university life and study.
- Mentees said that the information and advice that they received was additional to that which their schools provided.
- Mentees were enthused about university life and study by their interactions with the undergraduate mentors.

The success of the Year 12 E-mentoring programme led to planning for further offers of the programme for Year 12 members, along with an extension of E-mentoring to Year 11 members who took part in the GCSE Bootcamp. Although mentees and mentors were recruited from UniTracks' Year 11 and 12 pupils, the presentation of the scheme was greatly

³² <https://www.thebrightsidetrust.org/> (accessed, 11 October 2019)

delayed by negotiations between UniTracks and the Brightside Trust. When the schemes began to operate, the delay seems to have led to very low levels of mentee participation³³.

2.2.1.4 Evaluations

Over the period of the evaluations, a range of data collection methods were used – semi-structured interviews administered by telephone and face-to-face; pre and post event questionnaires; focus groups; observations; and document analysis. Although there were weaknesses in the administration of some of the data collecting (see below 2.3.4) the combined total of 128 people interviewed, and 358 questionnaires completed and returned was of sufficient extent and detail to enable the overall evaluation of UniTracks to be seen as an effective realist evaluation (White & Phillips, 2012)

2.3 .Weaknesses

There were weaknesses in both the evidence gathered by the evaluation, and the evaluation itself (in terms of the administration of some of the evaluation instruments). The weaknesses were most evident in terms of the common challenges faced by the necessary use of a realist evaluation process. That, in turn, led to the generation of data and limitations on conclusions that accompany any Level 2 evaluation (see *1.2.4.2 Setting standards of evidence and evaluating UniTracks* above). Specifically, the process elements of the evaluations were largely without challenges in terms of their conclusions. However, in terms of attribution and impact, there were limits to what was identifiable under a realist evaluation.

³³ Cullen, Stephen Michael (2018) [*Evaluation of the University of Warwick's outreach programme, UniTracks: The Warwick Young Achievers' Programme: Report 8 : UniTracks' Big Deal, Shooting the Past, and Mentoring, 2018.*](#) Coventry: Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research (CEDAR), University of Warwick.

This section of the report provides examples of identified weaknesses in the delivery of UniTracks' offers (2.3.1), discusses the questions of attribution and long-term impact (2.3.2), and notes some of the challenges relating to data collection (2.3.3).

2.3.1 Identifying weaknesses in project delivery and processes

The evaluation of UniTracks was effective in identifying issues and challenges in the delivery of the UniTracks' offers. The process element of the evaluation enabled changes to be made in the delivery of the key projects offered to the UniTracks' members. An illustrative example was the process evaluation of the Big Deal 2016. The Big Deal competition drew together a range of stakeholders - schools and school staff, business mentors, undergraduate mentors, university staff, and online resource providers – to support the Big Deal members in their participation. The 2016 evaluation identified a number of areas of challenge in the delivery of the project. These were: the role of schools and school staff, the workload commitment required from school students, the role and engagement of student mentors, the Big Deal blogs, and issues relating to the Big Deal launch event, and are covered below in 2.3.1.1 *An example of the value of process evaluation, the Big Deal 2016.*

2.3.1.1 *An example of the value of process evaluation, the Big Deal 2016.*

The role of schools and school staff. The level of engagement with the competition on the part of schools and their staff varied. There was a range of engagement. Some schools seem to have had a limited conception of the support that was needed for their UniTracks' Big Deal students, and for the competition in general. Only a small minority of schools appear to have assigned a gifted and talented co-ordinator (or similar) to support the students in the Big Deal competition. In some cases, the students do not appear to have been supported by the same member of staff throughout the 10 weeks. In one case, the assigned member of staff was absent from early on, and was not replaced by the school. Staff took different attitudes to their role, and support varied. There was very little communication between school staff and business or student mentors. Schools have the benefit of a UniTracks' 'Schools and

Teachers Guide’, but it may be that an additional ‘Big Deal’ guide is needed, and, a formal ‘contract’ might be considered between the Big Deal and schools, whereby schools agree to a number of support and engagement standards. Schools might also be encouraged to consider which of their staff should help support their Big Deal teams. Most schools offer business studies and/or economics, and it might be that staff from those departments would be able to support most effectively the school students involved in the competition. Finally, it should be stressed to schools that members for the Big Deal competition teams should have volunteered for the competition.

The workload commitment required from school students. Data from both business and student mentors suggested that, at times, the additional workload imposed on the school students by Big Deal might be excessive. It was suggested by some mentors that the competition might be a few weeks longer (but with the same requirements), or that there might be some reduction in the weekly tasks.

The role and engagement of student mentors. There appears to have been a range of levels of engagement shown by student mentors. Some student mentors were proactive and exhibited high levels of engagement with the school students and the business mentors; others were less proactive. Student mentors noted that they were unsure as to the full extent of their role, and how far, and in what ways, they were to be involved alongside the business mentors in face-to-face, and blog, contacts with the school students. It may be that the student mentors could receive additional information and/or training related to their role in the Big Deal.

The Big Deal blogs. In general, this platform worked well. The main issue that arose was that the student mentors could not directly access business mentor feedback to school students. Instead, the student mentors had to access this information separately. This issue was also

raised by the business mentors. It might be that, in future, the student mentors could be integrated more fully into the blog conversations between business mentors and school students.

The Big Deal launch event, 1. A number of the business mentors raised the issue of prior notice relating to their involvement in the launch event. There were concerns that they had not been given adequate prior notice of the event, and that had not been fully informed as to their role over the two days. Timings and information could be improved in relation to these points.

The Big Deal launch event, 2. Some of the business and student mentors felt that the school students struggled to understand fully some of the elements of the event. In particular, the presentation relating to budgeting and finance was believed to have presented problems for some of the school students. It was suggested that some of the information presented might be more suitable once the school students had been involved with their project for a couple of weeks.

The Big Deal launch event, 3. It was suggested that in order to ease day two of the event, the school teams should come prepared with short presentations covering their initial ideas of an entrepreneurial project. This would not have to be detailed, but it would enable the day two session to have a starting point produced by the school students. In this respect, point 1 above, concerning the background of the responsible member of school staff, might be relevant, with business studies or economics teachers being able to provide school students with some initial guidance.

2.3.2 Attribution and long-term impact

2.3.2.1 *The problem of UniTracks and causality*

As discussed in 1.2.4, there was a fundamental challenge faced by the evaluation of UniTracks, as with all similar evaluations. That challenge is of that of attribution. Given the lack of a control group, and the multiplicity of other influences – school, home life, personal interests, other educational experiences – on the participating UniTracks’ members, it is not possible to provide definitive, causal linkages between UniTracks’ membership and the ultimate goal of application for, and attendance at research-intensive universities. At most, it is correlational contributions that can be identified. Even where a UniTracks’ member does succeed in attending such a HE institution, it is not necessarily the case that there is a causal link between membership and university. Further, where it is possible to evidence the impact of UniTracks’ membership on individuals, it does not necessarily follow that that is generalisable.

2.3.2.2 *Getting to the University of Warwick, motivations, opportunities and UniTracks*

An example was provided by a University of Warwick undergraduate who was interviewed in the academic year 2018/19. The student had been a member of UniTracks, and was one of only three UniTracks’ members who enrolled at Warwick in 2018. The student was being funded through university by a corporate employer. The funding had been key to enabling her to attend, and the support to apply for that funding had come from a school teacher who had prior employment experience in the employer’s field. The student also talked about where the motivation to attend university had come from. The student’s mother was not interested in university, and thought that the student should have left school at 16, after GCSEs. Since arriving at Warwick, and meeting students from quite different backgrounds, the student had wondered what had been the motivation that enabled the student to succeed:

My mum she's not really been too into education, I don't think she really sees the point so a lot of it has been me pursuing it and trying to do it. At GCSE time she was like "there's no point in going to college, just stay home, get married" that kind of stuff but it was me having to convince her that...I don't know why I thought it would be a good idea, I've tried to question that since coming here but I think it was just knowing that that would be best for me and I didn't want to kind of just fall into that same cycle so it was just defying her and going against it but I think now she's...she's never, ever pushed me academically, I've never gone to...she doesn't know about university, she doesn't know about any of that stuff but now she's realised it's a banking job [the scholarship entails three years' work with a bank] and obviously that will bring in money now so obviously now she is getting on board with me going to university but obviously she's still not...I've seen other parents do put in quite a lot of effort and do push their kids but I'd prefer it this way when it's just me putting pressure on myself.

The student expanded on this explanation, saying that as a child they had lived close to the City of London, so that:

going on the bus, because that area is quite weird because you've got the poverty area then all these rich people and then you're back into the poverty, so it was kind of weird to pass through that and it was kind of me at that very early age thinking what do they have and how did they get to this and why haven't I got that and then how can I get that. That then reappeared as I did more work experience stuff and I did honestly try and get into banking for the money side of it but I think now I've realised I do enjoy it and it is a decent career path for me but I think at the beginning it was just wanting to make money and realising that the way to make that money is to focus on my education, try and support my family in the meantime and then try and get onto that larger goal.

This account attributes motivation to achieve a place at university, and having high aspirations to the impact of life experience, and the student's self-motivation. Further, it was a single teacher who provided the knowledge that scholarships were available from corporate sponsors. These key elements in the university success of the student came from outside UniTracks, and led to a place at Warwick. However, UniTracks did play a role, in providing the student with an experience of seeing a university, of understanding, in Year 10, the importance of having a university degree, and providing an image of an imagined goal:

I think that coming to UniTracks in Year 10 was quite influential because that was the first time I had seen a university and it was also I didn't know that you needed A levels to go to university, I didn't know the transition properly and although they had parents and child ones my mum didn't really come to that so it was just me kind of understanding my next steps because I feel like it is...you can research it but it's easier to have it from people who are similar to your age and I think it was just seeing the environment and then I remember made going to Warwick like a goal for me.

UniTracks did, therefore, have an impact in that it provided an experience and information that fed into the student's sense of their future. Nonetheless, the student had high levels of self-motivation, as well as being provided with some crucial knowledge by one teacher. The qualitative data collected by the evaluation interviewing the student provided a much clearer picture of why the student had become an undergraduate at the University of Warwick. That data suggests, in this case, that UniTracks was a positive addition, but that more important factors in the student's life experience and personality propelled them to a research-intensive university on a corporate scholarship. Intuitively, it would seem that it is most likely that each UniTracks' member who gains a place at a research-intensive university, like

Warwick, will have done so as a result of a combination of factors, including to a lesser, or perhaps, greater degree, UniTracks' membership.

2.3.2.3 Practical problems in measuring UniTracks' members' destinations

There is a marked challenge in relation to assessing the impact of UniTracks in terms of members' HE destinations, and that is the limited data available to UniTracks about university application and acceptance. UniTracks receives data on universities and degree courses that members apply for, required A level grades and results, along with destination. For example, data was available for ten UniTracks' members who applied for university entry in 2015; of those all took up offers, with four enrolling at Warwick, two at Sheffield, and one each to Birmingham, Southampton, Essex and the University of Central Lancashire. The largest number of UniTracks' members for whom this data was available for between 2015-2018, was for entry in 2017, when data was available for 19 members. These figures contrast with the approximately 110-130 UniTracks' members in each year's cohort. The data is therefore for relatively small numbers of UniTracks' members (around 15-17% of each year's UniTracks' cohort), and there is no data available for UniTracks' members who do not apply for university, apply for other HE institutions, enter employment, or take an apprenticeship. Further, there is no data available for the longer term progression of the UniTracks' members.

2.3.3 Evaluation data collection

The individual evaluation questionnaires were designed by CEDAR, but, administered by UniTracks and other delivery staff. Pre and post event and project questionnaires were reasonably well administered but with problems in terms of consistency of collection. For example, 81 pre-event members' questionnaires were completed and returned at the Year 10 Launch Event in 2015, but only 57 post-event questionnaires were completed and returned; while 46 pre-project Big Deal 2017 questionnaires were completed by the members and returned, but only 24 post-project. In addition, the number of questionnaires

completed and returned declined over the lifetime of the evaluations, with only 10 pre-project Shooting the Past questionnaires completed and returned in 2018, along with 4 post-project questionnaires.

3 Conclusions

UniTracks is one of a range of 18 long-term projects that the University of Warwick's Widening Participation (WP) department delivers to school-age children and young people in four geographic areas: Coventry, Warwickshire, and the West Midlands, with some offers open across England. UniTracks is open to around 440-520 Year 10-13 school students. Between November 2015-July 2019, CEDAR, University of Warwick, carried out an independent evaluation of the UniTracks programme, producing nine evaluation reports. This report, the tenth and final evaluation report, presents a concluding, reflective summation of the delivery and impact of UniTracks, along with an assessment of the limitations and strengths of the evaluation.

The evaluation of UniTracks adopted a 'realist evaluation' model suited to the nature of the UniTracks' offer. That evaluation provided data and findings that exhibit the majority of the required elements of Level 2 EIF standards, and all of the elements of Level 2 OFFA access standards. As such, the evaluation evidence represents a good level of evaluation in the wider context of the evaluation of similar WP initiatives, which are characterised by a lack of systematic and rigorous research.

The evaluation addressed issues of process and impact, and measured the effectiveness of UniTracks in terms of a logic model that was based on the organising approach of the programme, as laid out in Warwick's current Access and Participation Plans (APP) for 2019-

2020. The logic model is presented in 1.2.2 above (see Figure 1: Logic model for UniTracks in particular). The evaluation findings are related to that logic model in Figure 2 below:

Figure 2: Examples of UniTracks' interventions and the programme logic model

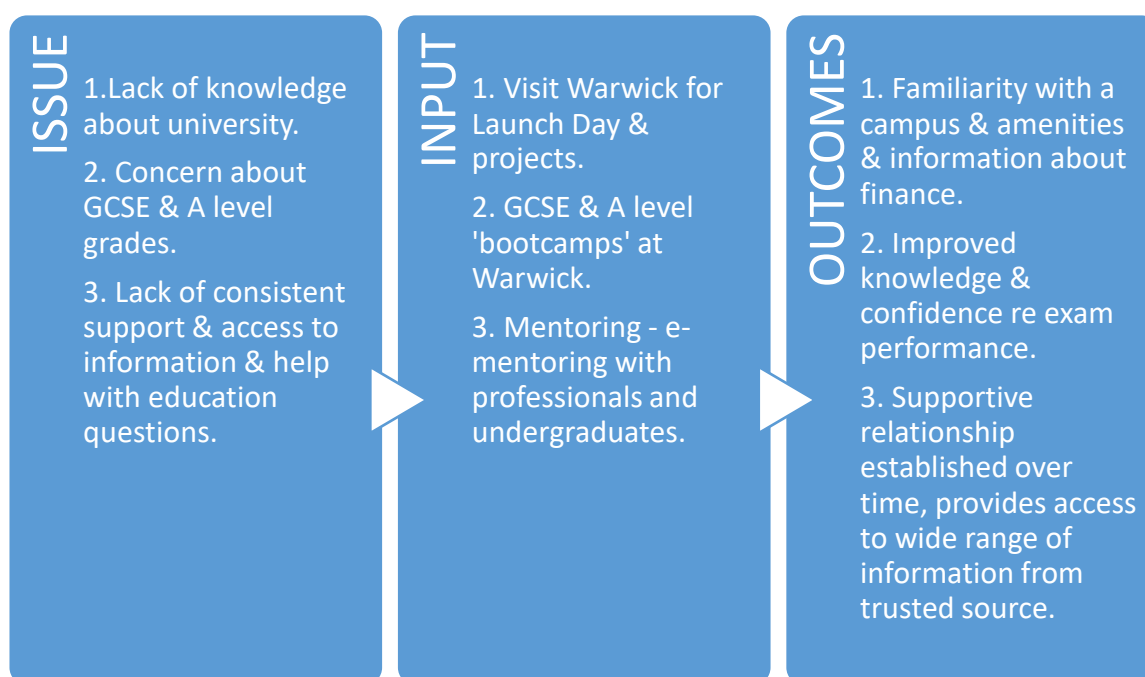


Figure 2 illustrates the relationship between the issues faced by the UniTracks' membership, the inputs from the programme, and the outcomes that were shown by the evaluation to have been achieved. The process elements of the evaluation were successful in critically examining the delivery of UniTracks' projects, and provided evidence of the immediate impact of participation on the members. However, the challenges of evaluating such a WP programme limited the ability to assign attribution and long-term impact to UniTracks. As with other WP programmes, such as the Aimhigher programme, 2004-2011, UniTracks can only be said to evidence correlational impact in terms of enabling the UniTracks' members to apply for and attend research intensive universities.

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